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ABSTRACT

The need for curriculum change is based on the recognition that there has been a consolidation of a number of trends that began at least 20 years ago. These trends include: changes in occupational profiles in an increasingly globalized work environment; the need to counteract social inequities and marginalization; the need to recognize diversity as a resource; the need to educate individuals to improve their citizenship; and other issues resulting from the various impacts of technological progress upon people and the environment. The increasing complexity of the world nowadays requires fundamental changes in educational practices, including replacing inflexible programs with flexible frameworks that enable learning in context. The process of educational change is fraught with tensions resulting from conflicting values, divergent focus of action, and conflicting priorities between educators, policymakers, and institutions. A new vision is proposed that assumes the centrality of empowerment, politics, and policy. It promotes access to four key components or "pillars": ideas, information, capacities, and resources. By strengthening dialogue to communicate ideas, creating swift and smooth availability of information for consensus-building, educating people to enhance their capacity to undertake reforms, and bringing all resources to bear on reform, a virtuous cycle would result to manage these tensions. (RT)

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The education system of the nineteenth century: the direction, trends and tensions of curriculum reforms in the twenty-first century

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The education system of the nineteenth century: the direction, trends and tensions of curriculum reforms in the twenty-first century

Cecilia Braslavsky

I. SOME MAJOR TRENDS OF SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT AND THE NEED TO REVIEW EDUCATION

The need for curriculum change is based on the recognition that there has been a consolidation of a number of trends that began at least twenty years ago. These trends relate to the demand for education, to the components and resources of educational processes and to the current provision of educational services.

There are at least six noticeable trends in the demand for education: (i) the changes in occupational profiles in the context of a world of work that is increasingly heterogeneous, in many cases shrinking, swiftly changing and ever more globalized; (ii) the need to counteract deepening social inequalities and increasing marginalization and violence; (iii) the need to recognize that the diversity between individuals and communities is a valuable resource that is different from social inequality; (iv) the need to educate individuals so that they are able to satisfy their need for better forms of representation as citizens in society; (v) the increasingly broader spectrum of issues arising, for example, from advances in biotechnology on which individuals may take decisions; and (vi) the coexistence of advantages and disadvantages resulting from the impact of technical progress on the environment and the quality of life of individuals and communities.

These trends bring different opportunities and new risks for education and education systems. The existing education system was invented to cope with a society organized in classes but giving at the same time opportunities for the majority to be integrated. It was improved to cope with an economy organized in sectors and seeking for specialization. In that economy, society expected that some people learned to think and to take decisions and some others to act without thinking. Especially the non-specialized working positions could be occupied by skilled trained workers having less general knowledge and capacities for lifelong learning.

The current situation makes it necessary to learn both: to act and to think. People who have not been educated in this sense are probably not able to maintain good jobs, or invent new ones, and even to have some possibilities to direct their lives. The speed of economic and social changes makes it also necessary to learn to tackle the stress of constant changes, for one to take advantage of the changes.

It is also necessary in this current situation to strengthen the teaching of values that could be understood and internalized. The attempts to react against marginalization using violence would not solve the problems, and more than that, the unequal and haphazard distribution of opportunities are threats to the survival of humankind.

With regard to the components of the educational processes, there are also at least four important trends to be considered: (i) the constant restructuring and the acceleration of scientific and technological knowledge, and the emergence of an authentic scientific and technological system that is rapidly making educational contents obsolete based on the provision of information; (ii) the growth of milieus outside the school for cultural creation and consumption by children and young people; (iii) the ever-widening use of the new information and communication technologies; (iv) the decline in the effectiveness of the teaching and school models developed in the previous centuries.

Special attention has to be paid to the first of those four trends in the framework of the need to shift the educational paradigm in relation to one of the basic educational principles. Education was supposed 'to transmit the culture of adult generations to younger generations'. Behind this principle is a hypothesis of stability and homogeneity that is not later acceptable. This hypothesis of stability involves generations—every generation and every culture. During the past centuries it was assumed that the young generation did not have a culture of its own and would accept willingly what was imposed by adults, that young people form an homogeneous group, where the only differences were biological or attributable to social class and that adult culture, and the way in which knowledge was produced and structured was stable over time.

The speed of current changes led to a rediscovery that each generation possesses its own culture, that there is wide diversity within each generation and that the way in which knowledge is produced and structured changes in relation to changing times. These rediscoveries and the evolution of educational psychology lead to the acceptance that children and young people have to be active participants in the educational processes and that even the diversity has to be encouraged. The

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increasing evidences about the instability of knowledge added elements to face the challenges of 'learning to learn'.

As a result of the concurrent actions of these trends, there is a growing contradiction between progress in incorporating individuals into formal education and the deficiencies in its quality, understood as its capacity to respond to new educational demands. Some of the above mentioned trends—for example, the demand for new profiles for economic, social and political participation, greater recognition of diversity, and the new dynamics of knowledge production—are posing renewed challenges to the meaning of education. In any case, this issue concerns the content of education, defined in the broadest sense of the term. The content of education is, in fact, all that should be taught or which is effectively 'contained' in educational practices: values, concepts and processes for learning, being, doing and living together.

The contradictions between quantitative advances and problems in the quality of education, the increasing use of the new information and communication technologies (ICTs), the growing demand from children and young people to learn actively and creatively, and a deeper understanding of the importance of links with communities so that education may be of better quality and more effective, also present new challenges to the issue of teaching methods and school management.

Increasing interconnections and the globalization of many economic decisions and processes, intensified migration, and the international scale of many communication media provide populations with new standards and parameters. There are attempts to counterbalance these through local and national production, and they also provoke resistance. This context produces tensions reflecting different attempts at achieving membership and constructing identities. These tensions make demands on education in terms of acquiring skills to facilitate their peaceful, creative resolution.

The new scenario at the beginning of the twenty-first century thus provides more opportunities and more risks for each and every individual to have access to a living wage, for the redistribution of the benefits of economic growth, for social cohesion, democracy and cultural diversity. It also provides more opportunities and risks for peace at the international, regional and local levels.

Education can be a powerful tool for exploiting the opportunities and avoiding the pitfalls of this new scenario. But not the same education as in the nineteenth century, which is still widespread today. This education has also just offered all that it could offer, to integrate to the new social and age groups.

II. SOME CURRENT ATTEMPTS AT REFORMING EDUCATION

In the 1980s and 1990s many countries worldwide introduced educational reforms focused on the above-mentioned concerns. These countries have implemented their reforms from national, provincial, to community levels. But there are still other countries that have not undertaken educational reforms. In the current context, there is no guarantee that carrying out a number of unconnected national, provincial or local reforms is a sufficient strategy for social cohesion and world peace. For example, even countries with a high degree of educational development and well supplied with resources are dissatisfied with the quality of education and the way the reforms are taking shape. Some prominent representatives of the efforts to introduce reforms are going so far that they write about the 'impossible reforms' (Meirieu, 2000).

It maybe possible to mention that these feelings do not arise because of the difficulties of finding the direction of the changes, but rather due to the difficulties in finding ways of managing those changes.

There is in fact a general agreement that there is a need to strengthen the competencies and identities in order to empower the young and adult people to find best solutions to problems that are existing and known, and to new and unknown problems that are going to emerge. There is also general agreement to the fact that to do it, it is necessary to count on old and new knowledge, to be able to learn today unknown knowledge and acquire the awareness of the consequences of actions in the short, medium and long terms. In other words, there is a general agreement with the needs of learning to do, to be, to live together, and to learn.

The ongoing reforms to tackle the challenges refer to the educational structure, curriculum and system, and school governance.

Concerning the educational structures many countries are trying to move from what can be called a 'pyramid for the pyramid' invented in the nineteenth century, to a more flexible one, structured according to the stages of life and admitting different ways of using the educational opportunities. They are also trying to move from streams for the different sectors of the economy in a modern industrial society (primary, secondary and higher), to a diversity that accepts and caters to different identities without aggravating social inequalities. They are trying to preserve spaces for lifelong basic education and to offer supplementary training for skills, that can be rapidly outdated.

But from day to day it seems clear that curriculum reform is becoming the axis of the next reform period. Many countries are trying to move from rigid programmes to flexible frameworks. In fact, after years of being obsessed about updated information, the educational community realises that a continuously updated curriculum is impossible, and that to improve the quality of education, it is much more important to reform the curriculum concept and structure.

It is quite impossible to explain in a short presentation all the aspects involved in this new approach. There is not enough information to do it. But it is possible to anticipate at least four trends of the new curricula: (i) it

should really try to orient the selection of contents to make possible the promotion of the competencies 'to do, to learn, to live together, and to be'; (ii) it should try to change the logic of integration at the primary level and differentiation by 'academic disciplines' at the secondary level, going into a logic of a tension between integration and differentiation throughout childhood and adolescence, allowing schools to combine the disciplines, workshops, projects, etc.; (iii) it should suggest replacing methods oriented towards transmission, by methods towards the 'construction' of skills and the use of knowledge in context as a way to learn; and (iv) it should include proposals to evaluate procedures and competencies instead of measuring the amount of information learned.

There are mainly two changes that are being introduced between system and school governance. The first one concerns internal processes. This consists of a shift from the top-down control of well-established processes to the promotion of the institutional capacity to learn through networking. The second one concerns external processes. This consists in a shift from an isolated way of doing to a partner-oriented action.

III. TENSIONS IN THE PROCESS OF EDUCATIONAL CHANGE

In talking about comprehensive reforms and, especially, about curriculum reforms, there is a general tendency to over emphasize or interpret results and products. The government representatives reinforce the perceived successes. Frequently, university representatives and unions prefer to emphasize criticism. But in fact those products and impacts are the results of very complex processes that suffer from a number of tensions. For the purpose of an orderly presentation, these tensions can be classified as political, conceptual and institutional ones, although in practice the political, the conceptual and the institutional tensions are rather closely interwoven aspects or dimensions of the same process.

The acceleration and focus of the education reform and especially of the curricular transformation processes were made possible by the pressures when knowledge became a core item on the public agenda. This shows that there is a new consensus regarding the role of knowledge in the future development of societies and individuals. However, apart from the highly abstract question, the degree of consensus with regard to what, how, and when teaching should take place can be relatively limited.

Consequently, when reforms begin, it is necessary to deal simultaneously with at least two needs that tend to impose two different speeds on the processes. On the one hand, it is known that all consensus-building processes require a great deal of time. On the other, the possibility of legitimizing government teams depends on the speed with which they can provide responses to the felt needs of different social groups and segments, in the case of curriculum reforms, the need to have available frames of references and appropriate tools to improve the quality of education. In short, in all reform processes, it is necessary to resolve adequately the tension between achieving consensus and being efficient, to mediate between different positions and quickly provide appropriate products.

Furthermore, this has to be done frequently, in a context of dissociation between criticism and action. In fact, in many countries a factor which on occasion restricts the spectrum of participants in the processes seeking consensus and efficiency is the way in which some academic and intellectual sectors in the one hand, and political sectors on the other, interpret the role of criticism. Numerous academics and intellectuals consider the criti-

TABLE 1. An overview of the reforms mentioned in the text

Horizontal structure	Countries of Northern Europe, Brazil, San Pablo	'Comprehensive school' School for children for young people
Vertical structure	Australia	Secondary – 'Taffies'.
Curriculum	Argentina	'Basic content' (CBC), by level and not by year.
Content	Canada	Concepts, procedures
Methodologies	Australia	Primary school class with 100 children
Evaluation	Baccalaureate, Abutter, Maturity	PISA
Links	Portugal Mozambique	Secondary schools in partnership with business teacher training institution with Danish NGO.
Management	UK (Scotland) Uruguay	School projects Flexibility of time

cal role that can be played within the framework of republican democracy to be the same as under military authoritarianism and attempt to monopolize this role. The paradoxical results of these attitudes are the abstention from the relevant decision-making processes relating to specifically professional aspects. Some politicians, for their part, reject all criticism of their administration, discrediting it as press manipulation, products of the opposition parties, or something of that nature. The result of this attitude is paradoxical, because they deprive themselves of external views which could provide them with interesting suggestions for an improved monitoring of their transformation. In fact, in both cases there is a lack of recognition of many personal and institutional efforts.

The tension between guaranteed national unity, federal power and local empowerment is also always present in reforms, and especially in the curriculum. Frequently, the professional teams tend to loose them when deciding percentage of contents, whoever has the power. But..., is it possible to establish a percentage of local mathematics contents? Most working teams are moving towards a recognition that in each content is a global, a national, a provincial or regional and a local dimension and that decisions have to be taken differently in each dimension.

In the constellation of situations, there are on occasions certain pressures from some decision-makers to restrict and accelerate the processes of consultation and participation to the minimum required to validate the activities, alternatives and proposals generated by the nearest available technical teams. This led to a loss of opportunities for improving quality and directing collective actions that can be provided by, for instance, curricular materials produced by genuine processes of consultation and participation.

Political tensions are not dissociated from ideological and conceptual tensions. Some requirements for political monitoring arise from conceptual decisions, such as how to manage the tension between discipline-centred or child-centred curricula. In fact, one of the most difficult decisions in curriculum reforms is whether or not to reproduce the discipline-based structure of academic and university research areas as a curricular structure. The result of this decision involves many teachers and pupils. Sometimes it is not easy for them to understand why some disciplines have to disappear, be merged or split.

There are also at least four other ideological or conceptual tensions to be managed in curriculum reforms. The first, refers to the interests of religious, ethnic and cultural groups; the second, refers to the interests of professional groups having different languages and also interests; the third, refers to promoting skills or knowledge; and the fourth, refers to indicating information that has to be communicated and focuses on values and procedures to be learned—both of which are linked to one of the most important institutional tensions, between decisions makers at governmental and school levels.

In fact, one of the most relevant tensions that takes place during reforms, and specially during the current curriculum reforms, relates to what should be laid down by the authorities to educational institutions which—conceptually—everyone accepts should be increasingly autonomous.

Educational institutions and teachers go through very important experiences, but experiences are not necessarily synonymous with competency to create the education needed in the twenty-first century. Therefore, another two tensions that emerge during reform periods are those between experience and competency on the one hand and experience and capacity for innovation on the other.

It is also necessary to mention at least some of the many other institutional tensions. In all complex reform processes, it is necessary to manage different timings, which can be described as political, technical, bureaucratic and pedagogical. In poor countries, it is necessary to count upon the existence of career functionaries having stability but low salaries on one side, and the hiring of highly paid consultants but with unstable positions, following the demands of the donors.

To go through all of these tensions, reform leaders have to be very clear that if the timing, needs, languages and interests of each actor are considered separately, everything will lead to conserving the nineteenth century education. Only a new vision of educational reform can help the reformers go through these complexities.

IV. FOUR PILLARS FOR A NEW VISION OF EDUCATIONAL REFORM: IDEAS, INFORMATION, CAPACITIES AND RESOURCES

Expanding education, and especially improving the quality of educational processes throughout curriculum reform on the one side and innovation on the other side, needs a new vision for action.

This new vision assumes the centrality of empowerment, politics and policy. It promotes the access to four pillars: ideas, information, capacities and resources.

The available resources for education are not always enough and have to be increased. Whatever resources are available should be efficiently used.

Oftentimes, it is amazing how the same ideas are repeated in very different contexts. It is also amazing to see very interesting ideas, which could be useful in one special context, are not known or recognized elsewhere. The strengthening of dialogue and, as far as possible, of certain basic political and social consensus on educational contents and methods, can really help to both find new ideas and also utilise the old ones better.

Nowadays, an enormous amount of information exists, however, it is not always available. In order to direct reforms, the different teams need swift and smooth availability of relevant information on contents, methods, as well as on processes of consensus building,

which may also be systematically articulated with quantitative, structural and qualitative information.

Lastly, it is said that there are not enough skilled people for undertaking the reforms. It is for this reason that the most important pillars to improve the capacities seem to be the strengthening of the collective and individual capacity of the actors at all levels of educational management and in the day-to-day activities of schools. This will allow the education personnel to participate in the processes of educational dialogue and consensus, to produce and use relevant information and to promote coherent reforms, especially curriculum reforms.

In other words, it is a question of promoting a virtuous circle between policy dialogue, availability, analysis and constant improvement of key information and the strengthening of the skills to manage the tensions. But there are two possibilities of managing the tensions. The first one, is to avoid complaints — letting things go on. The second one, is conducting the reforms in the decided direction, bearing in mind that reforms and especially curriculum reforms involve political, social and professional commitments.

The IBE intends to contribute in the construction of this virtuous circle, organizing opportunities for methodologies of exchange, information sharing and capacity-building through the promotion of networking in all the regions of the world. Networking could be in the form of ideas, information and capacities, which are available but unequally distributed. It is just a question of mobilizing them.

Reference

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